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Soviets lead in laser beam weapons for space shield

First of five parts

By Tom Diaz
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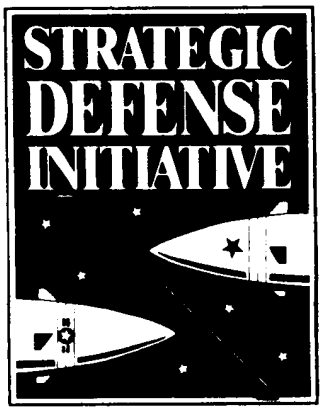
Soviet labor battalions have worked for years in the cold clear air of the high mountain near Dushanbe in the Tajik Socialist People's Republic, patiently hacking a giant military facility out of the rock at 7,000 feet.

Just as patiently, U.S. spy satellites orbiting overhead have photographed the progress of the work. Its significance only recently has become clear to intelligence analysts.

There at the top of the world, where the Soviet Union borders Afghanistan, the Soviets are building what U.S. officials now believe will be a powerful laser-beam weapon capable of knocking down U.S. satellites and perhaps ballistic missiles.



A senior administration official, who asked not to be identified, said the Dushanbe site underscores the lead the Kremlin enjoys in key areas of the high technology that is being explored by the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative, the missile defense program proposed by President Reagan in March 1983.

"They have some very interesting facilities right now which we do not fully understand, but which have the potential in a few years of giving them at the very least, strong ground-based, directed-energy [laser] capabilities against satellites, if not a beginning and emerging capability against ballistic missiles," the source said.

The site at Dushanbe, he said, "hasn't yet put out a single photon."

"But it's a big, big construction site that has been under way for a long time," he said. "It appears to be a major directed-energy facility composed of multiple elements, and our best estimate today is that it could well be a ground-based laser."

He and other U.S. officials believe the Soviets will be the first to deploy a working laser weapon, despite the great progress the United States has made in its SDI research program, popularly known as "star wars."

"Things are progressing at a rather incredible rate," Lt. Gen. James A. Abrahamson, director of the Strategic Defense Initative Office, said in a recent interview.

Many U.S. officials are confident that America can build an effective missile shield before the end of the century. But their official public forecasts are hedged by caution.

"There's a lot of science yet that we have to do, and even more engineering," Gen. Abrahamson said at a November press conference. "But I'm confident that the job can be done. The real question is just how fast and what is the best way."

The enthusiastic reports have done little to quell the debate over SDI.

Powerful political voices oppose the very idea of ballistic missile defense and some scientists remain skeptical of the claimed scientific advances.

Their skepticism contrasts sharply with the optimism of the March 1983 speech in which Mr. Reagan called upon scientists "to turn their great talents to the cause of mankind and world peace, to give us the means of rendering these nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete."

Four prominent opponents of SDI ripped into Mr. Reagan's proposal in an article appearing in the winter 1984-85 issue of "Foreign Affairs," that has become holy writ in the anti-SDI ranks.

The authors were former National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, Sovietologist and former Ambassador George F. Kennan, former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara and Gerard Smith, chairman of the Arms Control Association and chief negotiator of the 1972 SALT I treaty.

"We believe the president's initiative to be a classic case of good intentions that will have bad results because they do not respect reality," they wrote. "What is centrally and fundamentally wrong with the president's objective is that it cannot be achieved."

The core of their case was that a 100 percent effective missile defense shield is technically impossible. A shield less than perfect is worse than no shield at all, because it will encourage the Soviets to build more missiles to overwhelm it, and deal arms control a fatal blow.

But supporters of SDI say a missile defense need not be perfect to be effective. In any case, they say, the Soviet missile defense program is roaring ahead. The SDI program has proven its worth in the arms control field by spurring the Soviets to return to stalled talks in Geneva, the supporters argue. Eventually, it will lead to massive reductions in offensive nuclear arms, phased in while both sides are sheltered behind defensive shields.

For now, most opponents concede, the pro-SDI forces are ahead in the debate. Congress has approved an ambitious research program, originally scheduled to spend $27 billion between 1985 and 1990 but pruned by about one-fifth in each of the last two fiscal years.

SDI critics say the president has the edge only because he hasn't put a specific system for deployment on the table. That won't happen until the early 1990s. Once specific proposals are made, opponents say, the debate will get much hotter. The American people then will have to decide two grand questions: Can it be done? Should it be done?

Americans already have seen a cartoon version of the debate in television ads produced by SDI proponets and opponents. But the arguments that will ultimately determine the fate of SDI involve not cartoons, but the world of nuclear strategy and arms control.

In that dark and mysterious world, two basic camps are powerfully divided by widely different views on two key issues:

- The nature of the Soviet Union, its military force and its intentions for the use of that force.
- The reach and grasp of modern science and technology.

The camps drew battle lines over these two issues long before Mr. Reagan's 1983 speech. Many of the same people slugged their way through a similar debate in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The opponents of ballistic missile defense won that debate. Their victory is enshrined in the 1972 SALT I Anti-ballistic Missile [ABM] Treaty, which forbids either country to develop, test or deploy a national ABM system — the kind SDI envisions — or any of its components.

To understand the ABM treaty, one must refer to the grim logic of nuclear deterrence, and the concept of "mutually assured destruction" (known as "MAD") on which it is based.

For a decade after World War II, the United States held an effective

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